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Southern Comfort by Andrew Lyman

Andrew Lyman’s *Southern Comfort* is a photography exhibition focusing on being queer and a Southerner. Through intimate portraits, candid photos, and scenes, Lyman captures an experience not typically given a platform to be seen. His direct use of non-standard photography only helps strengthen the subject matter of his photographs – he often uses double exposure, manipulation of photos during the development process, and more.

*Southern Comfort* had its opening night on Friday, November 18th at Murmur, a DIY venue and gallery space in the burgeoning South Broad Street arts district. The gallery space is for the most part standard, with white walls and concrete floors. The space is smaller than most galleries and provides a sense of intimacy that only helped the intention of Lyman’s work. All walls and display surfaces were used in this exhibition. What really helped the exhibition in terms of space was that there was an overwhelming amount of unused space. The closeness of it all really helped. The staff and personnel who worked the event were cordial and nice and nothing really took away from the exhibition.

Lyman’s took a simple approach of displaying his work. Most of his photographs were standard 4 inch by 6 inch prints. These prints were strung on clear hanging string in rows varying from 6 to 8 photos per row. In other spaces in the gallery, photos were displayed in frames in large groups on tables and display cases. The frames used to display them were kitsch, flashy, and noted as Southern styled. Certain photos were printed larger and framed above differing groups of smaller photos. The recurring theme of these photos were that the subjects were always facing away from the camera, always showing their backs, and the backgrounds were bright, contrasting colors like pink or baby blue.

As I stated before, only a few of the photos displayed featured any kind of manipulation. Most of Lyman’s work focused on unedited, natural, candid photos of his subjects. However, a few pieces featured double exposure photography – where he took multiple photos on top of each other. Others featured where he scratched photos to obscure people’s faces or the backgrounds around them. It’s not stated in the description of the exhibition or his work in general as to why this was done to certain photos.

The subjects of his photos are either seen doing mundane, everyday tasks in differing locations, or are just captured candidly, like in bed or cooking, etc. This, I feel, really strengthens his work and the overall presentation of the exhibition. Had his subjects of his work been posed or overly stylized, the commentary of his capturing raw Southern queerness would have faltered. The idea of capturing something in its environment is opposite to something posed or forced.

Most of Lyman’s work used the human form as both subject and content. The way that bodies are seen in his work is that they take up the most space in the photos. Instead of trying to position his subjects in an interesting or captivating environment, Lyman disregards the space and environments around his subjects and lets them take front stage. I feel as if this helps build the meaning and intention in the exhibition.

The reason why I chose this exhibition to write on is because of its intention in capturing and framing Southern queers in our natural and everyday activities and habitats. The general idea of Southern queers is that we are constantly fighting religious zealots for basic human respect and rights and that we have no time or space to create community. This is all horrendously false. What I appreciated about this exhibition is that it gave space for us not only break that stereotype, but to also grow beyond it. The photography of Andrew Lyman really allows his subjects to exist freely as them and not in some forced pretense. It allows space to showcase their flaws, their beauty, their anger, and much more. This is greatly needed when discussing Southern queer and trans people. Our national image is very one dimensional, and if anything, this exhibition is a great step in allowing us to showcase how multi-faceted we really are.

I luckily got a chance to speak to Andrew Lyman about his work and what led to the creation of this exhibition. Going into viewing the exhibit, there’s obviously a lot that could be assumed about it – like any other exhibit for that matter. However, I wanted to make sure I got a better idea about the exhibit, his intent and his background as a photographer.

“What made you start photography?”

“I've always been around photography in some sense. I'm the youngest in my family by 9 years, so I had this record of my parents and two older sisters that I would look at when I was home alone. I had this fantasy of life before I was born in pictures my dad took on his 35mm film camera and then printed at Eckerd’s. I never had that when I was growing up because of the way digital cameras and computers changed the way we made and looked at images. I made pictures growing up mostly for the internet and creating a persona. The purpose of pictures was to determine and present identity and sometimes prove beauty, rather than to document. It’s like this with most social media. In college, I took a black and white photography class where I used my dad's old camera for the first time. Being in a period of self-discovery of my queerness and being around people like me, it felt like I was making my own family album. I was doing things and meeting people and growing and doing a lot of things for the first time. And I was capturing it all on film for myself, for the most part, separate from social media.”

“How did you go about photographing your subjects? Were they posed, or is your process more candid?”

“I carry my cameras around everywhere and take pictures as things happen. I'm always taking pictures. Some are purely candid, but a lot exist in a space where my subjects and I just kinda play around. Having a camera around is always different than not, but the act of looking and the performance in front of someone looking is a very honest and real situation. I'm definitely not trying to pretend anything isn't there. It’s just me taking pictures of my friends.”

“Did you set out with a theme in mind or did it occur naturally?

“The theme definitely came after the work, trying to find some sort of poetic sentiment that complements the work and gives the viewer a sort of lens to see the work. There are a lot of themes within the work, especially the grids, that reveal themselves through the pairing and placement. The correlation between the photos that are placed next to each other. They're like a big puzzle.”

Overall, I truly enjoyed *Southern Comfort*. As a queer Southerner who is very used to underrepresented and hyper stylized ideas of what my existence means, it was nice to see myself reflected in the work of a peer of similar experience. I genuinely see Lyman’s work as a great starting point of expanding upon modern Southern queer photography.